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# **AN OVERVIEW OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORY**

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND SOLDIER PRODUCTIVITY TECHNICAL AREA



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## AN OVERVIEW OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORY

*ABSTRACT* → Career development theory and research have traditionally dealt with young adult males. The summaries of theories relating to career development and career choice found in Crites (1969), Jepsen and Dilley (1974), and Osipow (1973) contain little that is directly pertinent to the career development of mature adults. Increasingly, however, organizations such as the U.S. Army (Downey, 1974; Medland, 1971), the Catholic Church (Hall & Schneider, 1973), and industry (Brewer, Hanson, Van Horn, & Mosely, 1975) are showing concern for the career development of their adult personnel. This concern rests on the assumption that the needs of the organization are best served by optimizing the career development of its personnel.

In the Army, for example, several studies (see Yates and Macpherson, in press) have revealed the need for improved career counseling and a greater understanding by officers of the career progression system. Thus, an understanding of career development theory might be helpful to those persons who are concerned with these needs. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to present a summary of career development theory for individuals involved in studying, planning, or implementing officer career progression. The discussion is not intended to provide an in-depth treatment of the topic. Rather, the objective is to describe the general characteristics of different types of career development theories and to review selected theories illustrative of the various types. For more detailed expositions of the theories, the reader is referred to Crites (1969), Jepsen and Dilley (1974), and Osipow (1973).

## THEORIES OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER CHOICE *ABSTRACT*

Career development is one facet of an individual's general development. As such, it is comparable to other types of development--e.g., physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. In this paper, "career development" is considered to be the "developmental stream of events which constitute one's occupational life" (Zytowski, 1970, p. 10). This definition, it should be noted, is at variance with some contemporary usage in which "career" includes all aspects of a person's life--educational, occupational, avocational, familial, recreational, etc. To this author, however, such a definition is too general. It equates "career" with "life" and deprives the literature of a term for occupationally-related roles and activities. A more restricted definition, such as the one given above, appears to be of greater usefulness for the career development of Army officers.

A distinction also needs to be made between "career development" and "career choice." The former term implies a developmental sequence which can extend over the entire lifespan of an individual. "Career choice," on the other hand, generally refers to the actual selection of a career and involves a more limited time span. In the discussion that follows, both types of theories will be included.

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\* While ARI research on career progression has thus far focused on the Officer Personnel Management System and the career needs of junior officers, the career development concepts presented here are seen to apply to Army enlisted personnel as well. It is believed that these ideas are also applicable to other groups of mature adults.

## NONPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Crites (1969) has characterized some theories of career development or career choice as "nonpsychological" because they concern factors external to the individual. Although the emphasis of this paper is primarily on the psychological theories, the nonpsychological theories will be briefly described.

Accident theories attribute the choice of a career to chance happenings. Events such as war, business slumps or booms, or serious illness can affect a person's career development. Although chance factors may sometimes have an effect on a person's career, accident theories are not very useful in understanding career development because of the unpredictability of chance occurrences.

Economic theories are based on the proposition that the careers people choose maximize their gains and minimize their losses. These theories emphasize the role of information (supply and demand, income, worker traits, etc.) and also assume rationality and freedom of choice on the part of the person selecting a career. In the Army situation, the supply and demand factor is very important in officer career development because of its influence on assignments and retention. However, economic variables are included in other types of theories, and the assumptions of rationality and freedom of choice cannot always be met. Later writings have modified the freedom of choice aspect, and the interested reader is referred to Crites (1969) for a comprehensive review of economic theories of career choice.

Sociological theories hold that society and its culture are the primary determinants of an individual's career. The influence of culture and society is transmitted through various social systems, such as the subculture, peer group, church, family, etc. A good example of this type of theory is that of Anne Roe (Roe, 1957; Roe & Siegelman, 1964), who related family variables to the individual's later career. Roe has identified three basic parental attitudes--acceptance, concentration, and avoidance--which (when a warmth-coldness dimension is also considered) determine the nature of parent-child interactions. If, for example, the family atmosphere is one of warmth and acceptance, a person will develop an orientation toward people and choose a career which involves working with people, such as a social service or business contact occupation. Other types of family atmosphere would lead to other outcomes (Roe & Siegelman, 1964). Roe's theory has resulted in considerable research, with largely negative results.\* After evaluating studies designed to test Roe's theory, Osipow has tenuously concluded that the results suggest that "individuals are either person- or nonperson-oriented in their interests and that their orientation influences the choice of their vocation" (Osipow, 1973, p. 35).

## PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Although the nonpsychological theories have drawn attention to important aspects of career development, such theories tend to deal with variables which are external to the person and which are frequently not amenable to change. Psychological theories, on the other hand, emphasize the influence of psychological characteristics on the person's career development. In general, the nonpsychological

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\* Much of the research has involved methodological problems. For descriptions and evaluations of the individual studies, see Crites (1969) and Osipow (1973).



theories have been of lesser significance in the field of career psychology than have the psychological theories. The prime exception to this generalization is Roe's sociological (family) theory, which has led to considerable research. In an effort to assess the influence of various career development theories, Crites (1969, p. 611) sampled the number of citations in the literature and the number of research studies various theories generated. He found that the theories having the greatest impact were those of psychologists Super, Roe, and Holland.

Crites (1969) has classified the psychological theories of career choice into four major categories: (1) trait-and-factor, (2) psychodynamic, (3) developmental, and (4) decision-making theories. A recent application of social learning theory to the career decision-making process (Krumboltz, 1974) suggests the addition of another category, (5) learning theory.

Trait-and-factor theory. This grandfather of vocational choice theories was originally developed by Frank Parsons, director of the first vocational guidance center in the United States. The essence of Parsons' (1909) theory was a three-step process: (1) understanding the person's characteristics, (2) acquiring adequate knowledge of occupations, and (3) making a choice based on a logical matching of the results of the first two phases of the process. Parsons termed the last stage "true reasoning," a characterization which emphasized the rationality of the process.

The rapid expansion of psychological testing, which began in World War I, fit in well with the Parsonian paradigm. In trait-and-factor theory, understanding the person's characteristics is essential to the making of a realistic career choice. This aspect of the model led naturally to an emphasis on testing, because measurement of the individual's traits is a logical means of acquiring an understanding of the person. Occupational research begun in the 1930's by the United States Employment Service was concerned not only with tests and measurement but also with occupational requirements and trends--a development which also supported the trait-and-factor approach.

In traditional trait-and-factor theory, then, career selection was viewed as an event--i.e., a one-time occurrence that matched a person with an occupation. There was little emphasis on either the developmental events which preceded the career choice or on the consequences of that career decision.

Psychodynamic theories. In sharp contrast to trait-and-factor theories which stress the observable, measurable characteristics of the person, psychodynamic theories explain vocational choice in terms of the individual's motives or drives. Psychoanalysis-related theories (e.g., Bordin, Nachman & Segal, 1963; Brill, 1949) apply the usual Freudian concepts and principles to career choice. In general, career (as well as all other activities) is seen as a sublimation of the basic drives. The coping mechanisms an individual acquires to control his or her sexual and aggressive impulses influence the development of his or her personality, which then determines the choice of a career. The most specific psychoanalytic formulation of career choice has been proposed by Bordin et al. (1963), who have outlined the process in some detail and analyzed the various aspects of three occupations (accounting, social work, and plumbing) in terms of several psychosexual dimensions. Although psychoanalytic approaches such as that of Bordin et al. have intriguing possibilities for career development theory, little research has been done using a strictly psychoanalytic framework.

Like psychoanalytic theories, Roe's need theory of vocational choice posits that career choices are a function of personality. In Roe's theory (Roe, 1957; Roe & Siegelman, 1964), early experiences (particularly those occurring in the family) influence the development of the needs hypothesized by Maslow (1954). The satisfaction of these needs determines the extent to which the various needs motivate an individual's vocational behavior. There is some confusion concerning what Roe means in terms of the relation of career to kinds or to levels of the needs. See Crites (1969, p. 97) for a discussion of this point.

Two other theories, which will be discussed later, also can be considered psychodynamic in nature in that they are concerned with the role of the self-concept in career choice. Although Super's (1957) theory is clearly a developmental theory, Super's formulation is centered around the processes of the formation of the person's self-concept, the translation of the self-concept (perhaps through identification with a role model), and finally, the implementation of the self-concept by obtaining employment or training (Super, 1972).

Another self theory is that of Tiedeman and O'Hara (1963). Although this theory is subsequently discussed as an example of a career decision-making model, the authors see the career choice process as involving the development of a vocational identity. The constructs of self and of identity thus provide the primary motivational forces for career choice.

Developmental theories. More than any other type of career development theory, developmental theories delineate a process which spans a significant portion of the individual's life. Some of these theories, such as the one proposed by Ginzberg and his colleagues (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951; Ginzberg, 1972), tend to focus on the more limited time span of the initial career choice process. The more comprehensive theory developed by Super (1957) takes into account almost the entire lifespan of the person. The common thread among the various developmental theories lies in the "stage" concept--people progress through a series of relatively well-defined stages during the course of their career development. Hence, developmental theories describe career development in terms of a process, rather than an event.

One of the earliest developmental theories of career choice was that of Ginzberg et al. (1951), which was an interdisciplinary effort produced by an economist, a psychiatrist, a sociologist, and a psychologist. Although the original Ginzberg et al. formulation has been revised to a certain extent (Ginzberg, 1972), only the stage framework will be discussed here. According to these authors, an individual's career development has three major periods--the fantasy, tentative, and realistic periods. During the fantasy phase of career development, the child has little awareness of how one attains career goals. The youngster's thinking about career, largely the result of daydreaming and the wish to be an adult, is relatively untempered by any consideration of reality factors. As children grow older, however, they begin to take reality into account. The tentative period consists of four substages: the interest, capacity, value, and transition stages. In this period the individual first becomes aware of liked and disliked activities and of the role interests have in career choice. Then, in sequence, he or she focuses on capacities and values as factors to be considered. Finally, in the transition substage, the necessity for making a career choice is



faced, and the individual becomes increasingly aware of the complex of factors which must be considered in choosing a career.

The last phase of the developmental sequence is the realistic period, which is subdivided into the exploration, crystallization, and specification stages. In the exploration stage, the preliminary career decisions are tested in a realistic context--e.g., an entry job or college courses in a field or fields of interest. The crystallization stage then emerges as a result of the feedback experienced during the exploration stage. The individual evaluates his or her successes and failures and evolves a more specific notion of his or her career goals. When this process is complete, the final stage of specification is attained, during which a specific career choice is made.

In a "restatement" of the theory, Ginzberg (1972) has characterized it as a "sociopsychological" rather than a developmental approach. The revision of the theory stresses such factors as the role of work experience and the various constraints (such as parental education and values) which affect career development. In this reformulation, Ginzberg emphasized that occupational choice is a lifelong process, and he decried the neglect of the mature adult in the allocation of guidance services.

Super's formulation also adheres to the stage format. Super (1957) has described career development as a series of consecutive periods, each of which involves a set of vocational developmental tasks.\* Super's developmental sequence begins with the growth stage, which is followed by the exploratory, establishment, maintenance, and decline stages. The most important periods are the two following the first stage. In the exploratory phase of career development, individuals clarify their ideas about themselves and the world of work, make tentative career choices, and engage in job trials which tend to be uncommitted. The establishment stage of development, however, involves job trials of a committed nature and advancement in the career. During the maintenance period, the person consolidates his or her career status and advancement. The decline stage precedes retirement.

Super has also incorporated into the theory his oft-cited assertion that career is an implementation of one's self-concept. In addition, he has introduced the concept of career maturity, a theoretical construct which enables the counselor or researcher to assess the individual's level of career development. Both the idea of career as an implementation of the self-concept and the construct of career maturity have been exceedingly influential in career development theory and research.

The "model of post-entry career development" proposed by Hall (1971) also views career as an implementation of the self-concept. Hall's career subidentity is that aspect of the person's total identity which is involved in his or her career role. In Hall's formulation, career subidentity is developed through a process of setting goals, attaining them, and experiencing psychological success

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\* The vocational developmental tasks are: crystallizing a vocational preference, specifying it, implementing it, stabilizing in the chosen vocation, consolidating one's status, and advancing in the occupation (Super, 1972, p. 19). For an outline of attitudes and behaviors associated with each task, see Osipow (1973, pp. 137-140).

and increased self-esteem (or the reverse, by failing to attain the goals). The feedback process is repeated, with the career subidentity in a state of continual growth and change, although not necessarily at a constant rate.

Decision theories. Theories falling into this category are more properly theories of career choice rather than theories of career development. Jepsen and Dilley (1974) have reviewed and compared in some detail eight models of vocational decision-making. The conceptual framework of this type of theory assumes a decision-maker in a decision situation who organizes relevant information in accordance with various strategies. Alternative actions are considered, several outcomes (usually characterized by probability and value) are anticipated, and there is a commitment to the resulting course of action. Jepsen and Dilley (1974) also differentiated between "descriptive" and "prescriptive" models. The former type concerns the way in which an individual actually makes a career decision, while the "prescriptive" designation applies to theories which formulate rules for better decision-making.

One of the descriptive theories discussed by Jepsen and Dilley (1974) is that of Tiedeman and O'Hara (1963), a formulation which is an elaboration of the Ginzberg et al. (1951) stages and which can be viewed as a theory of career development.\* The Tiedeman and O'Hara model has two major phases: (1) the anticipation period (incorporating the exploration, crystallization, choice, and specification substages), during which the person goes from rather disorganized thinking about career through stages of increasing clarification, and (2) the implementation and adjustment period, which is divided into substages (induction, transition, and maintenance) involving the development of a sense of self and a vocational identity. The four substages of the anticipation period constitute a decision-making model according to the criteria of Jepsen and Dilley (1974) and are discussed in some detail in their article. In contrast to the Tiedeman and O'Hara model, Katz' paradigm of career decision-making is a prescriptive one (in that it delineates how the process should proceed) and is more limited in scope (Katz, 1966). Katz believes values are the "major dynamic force in decision-making" (Katz, 1966, p. 3), and the computerized guidance system developed by Katz and his colleagues at the Educational Testing Service focuses on identification and weighting of the user's values (Katz, 1974).

In general, the career decision-making models focus on the actual process by which the decision is or should be made and are less concerned with constructs such as self-concept or career maturity.

Learning theories. In his explication of a social learning theory of career decision-making, Krumboltz (1974) proposes that there are four major sets of variables which influence career decision-making--genetic factors, environmental factors, learning experiences, and task approach skills (attitudes and proficiencies which result from the interaction of genetic and environmental influences). These four "influencers" do not function separately, but interact to produce various

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\* This theory, with its stress on personality and career and its attention to the construct of "ego identity," is similar in scope to Super's theory of career development. Following Jepsen and Dilley (1974), however, only the decision-making aspect will be considered here.



outcomes such as self-observation generalizations (self-evaluations), task approach skills (decision-making competencies), and actions (entry level career behaviors). In his paper, Krumboltz puts forth a number of testable propositions. These propositions involve reinforcement, modeling, and access (or lack of access) to appropriate persons and resources. Thus, in his theory, Krumboltz incorporates not only the principles of learning theory but also takes into account the constraints imposed by society and its agents.

#### GENERAL THEORIES OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the nonpsychological and psychological categories described above, Crites (1969) has classified some theories as "general" because they attempt to deal with a wider complex of variables and their interactions than do the theories previously described.

One example of this type is the theory of John Holland (1973). Holland's theory is related to the psychodynamic theories in that it holds that career choice is a function of personality. In Holland's view, both people and environments can be classified into six major types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. The individual seeks out an occupation in an environment which is compatible with his or her personality type. (In actuality, people and occupations tend to be combinations of types, but the general principle holds.)

Holland's theory has stimulated a great deal of research, and the results of the many studies have been largely supportive (Holland, 1973). The influence of Holland's theory has been further demonstrated by the fact that the most widely used interest inventory (Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory) now categorizes both occupations and general interest areas according to the Holland schema and also gives each respondent scores on six "themes" which correspond to the Holland types. Holland himself has developed two instruments (the Vocational Preference Inventory and the Self-Directed Search) which yield occupational codes based on the Holland types. Another application of Holland's theory is found in DISCOVER, a computer-based career guidance and counselor-administrative support system. Student users of this system are taught to classify occupations according to Holland's six groups (Harris-Bowlsbey & Boyd, 1975). DISCOVER also administers the Self-Directed Search on-line. In addition, the Holland typology has been used as a classification system for career information, and the Holland codes can be converted to Dictionary of Occupational Titles codes and vice versa. Few other theories have led to such practical applications.

Another attempt to develop a multi-variable theory of career choice is that of Blau, Gustad, Jessor, Parnes, and Wilcock (1956). These authors have presented a "conceptual framework" (they specifically discount their contribution as a "theory") which incorporates principles and research findings of economics, sociology, and psychology. The rather complicated formulation of Blau et al. relates antecedent conditions of biology, social structure, and physical environment acting through personality development and "historical change" (shifts in social/industrial variables) to the immediate determinants of occupational entry. These immediate determinants are characteristics of individuals (e.g., occupational information, technical qualifications) and characteristics

of occupations (e.g., demands, rewards), which account for the eventual occupational entry by effecting a compromise by the individual between his or her preferences and expectations. For details of this process, see Blau et al. (1956) or the shorter, yet comprehensive, version in Crites (1969).

#### SHORTCOMINGS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Although authorities differ somewhat in the enumeration of specific criteria for a theory, it is generally acknowledged that a theory should have characteristics such as internal consistency, parsimony, testability, heuristic value, etc. (Crites, 1969; Hall & Lindzey, 1970; Marx, 1951; Osipow, 1973; Shertzer & Stone, 1974). Crites (1969) and Osipow (1973) contain comprehensive evaluations of career development theories in terms of the criteria of theory adequacy, and both authors have concluded that most of the theories have shortcomings in terms of such criteria.

Subsequent developments in career development theory, however, might meet some of the objections raised by Crites and Osipow. In a discussion of theory construction, Crites (1969, pp. 635-637) has illustrated how "intervening variables" such as intelligence might account for the discrepancies between outcomes predicted by a theory and those results actually obtained. Holland and Gottfredson (1976), in a recent paper, have cautioned that variables such as power and intelligence, which lie outside the scope of the Holland typology, should also be taken into consideration in testing the theory. In addition, Krumboltz' (1974) theory has been presented since the Crites and Osipow evaluations of career development theory were made. The propositions of this theory are based on well-established principles of learning theory and lead easily to specific and testable hypotheses. Thus, Krumboltz' theory may meet some of the criteria for theory adequacy to a greater extent than other career development theories do at the present time.

Another shortcoming of career development theory lies in the fact that these formulations and the research generated by them have focused on young adult males. Consequently, these theories are not always directly applicable to the mature adult. Super's theory, which is almost a womb-to-tomb sequence, does not account for such phenomena as an officer's leaving the Army after 20 years of service. Other theories, such as the decision-making models and the Ginzberg et al. approach, are even more limited in that they deal only with the selection of a career and not what happens to the individual after the career choice is made.

#### USEFULNESS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Although career development theories may fall short of meeting the criteria for "ideal" theories, they can still be useful. One function of a theory is prediction. A career development theory proposes that certain phenomena will occur under given conditions. As a result, career outcomes can be predicted for given sets of circumstances. It may be, for example, that Super's developmental stages and vocational tasks provide an appropriate description of the career development of Army officers. Or, perhaps one of the decision-making theories is a suitable model of the process an officer goes through in making a career decision. If a theory provides an accurate description of officer career behavior, that theory will suggest procedures which will facilitate career development of officers.



If, as an illustration, "possession of information concerning the preferred occupation" is a behavior associated with the vocational developmental task of specification (Osipow, 1973, p. 138), then the provision of information concerning an alternate specialty would be useful to an officer in determining his or her preferences for an alternate specialty. Although such an example might seem self-evident, it is illustrative of the way in which a theory can be used to suggest interventions for desired outcomes. To the extent that a theory suggests how career information should be provided to maximize the outcome of enhanced career development, testable hypotheses with practical applications could be readily generated.

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